

STORIES OF THE DELTA

On June 4, 5, and 6, 1996, 25 experts on the people, history, culture, economy, and natural environment of the Lower Mississippi Delta gathered in Memphis, Tennessee. Their purpose was to identify key stories and some of the sites that make this region of the country worthy of national recognition and attention. A broad-ranging content and collaborative spirit were generated at the Lower Mississippi Delta Symposium and became the heart of the “Stories of the Delta” presented here. Throughout the heritage study process, the team worked closely with these “experts”, various regional partners, and the public to affirm and enhance the work accomplished at that first meeting in Memphis.

The “Stories of the Delta” — the people, places, and events that bring this region of the country to national attention — form a complex yet cohesive picture of the Delta’s natural, cultural, historic, and ancient resources. These are the stories or themes related to the Delta that visitors and residents alike should understand to appreciate the impact this region has had on the formation of our national character. The stories, combined with the appropriate sites and resources to tell the stories, form the basis for the concepts found in this heritage study.

THE RIVER

The physical presence and historical development of the Mississippi River are fundamental stories of the Lower Mississippi Delta Region. The river is the defining feature that touches all aspects of life in the Delta — settlement patterns, agriculture, music, art, literature, architecture, and the economy.

For thousands of years the Great River and its tributaries have constructed, destroyed, and redefined the physical landscape of the Delta. The river challenged human inhabitants to harness its wildness and harvest its great bounty.

Dynamic geologic and human processes changed the river over time:

- Ice-Age conditions braided the river 18,000 years ago. A mere 5,000 years ago natural forces set it on its meandering path creating a nutrient rich landscape.
- Agriculture flourished in the rich alluvial sediments laid down by the river over the centuries.
- Successive human attempts to control the river’s power and path created conflicts between natural and human processes.
- America has long used the Mississippi River system as a major transportation and migration corridor - from goods shipped to interior as well as international markets to the thousands of poor farm laborers and their families who migrated to the industrial centers of the north.
- The river influenced human settlement patterns, uniting as well as dividing.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Human interaction with the Delta environment varied with the diverse cultural groups that inhabited the region. Prehistoric hunting practices and settlement patterns were the first human influences on the Delta’s landscape. To a greater or lesser degree successive generations of people manipulated the Delta landscape to make the land inhabitable and to exploit its rich and abundant natural resources for trade and commerce.

- The building of dams, levees, and locks altered, and in some cases, eliminated the natural shoreline, wetlands, and hardwoods and contributed to the human occupation of the landscape.
- The Flood of 1927 was the largest hydrologic event of this century. It signaled the end of a levee system’s ability to control floods.

- Farming, agricultural mechanization, pesticide use, lumbering, manufacturing, and other practices led to erosion problems and water pollution.
- The environmental awareness that began in the 1970s positively influenced floodway improvements, levee construction, clean water issues, and wetlands preservation.
- The effect of technology on the human environment, such as air conditioning, changed living conditions for everyone.

DELTA CULTURES

The story of the Delta is the story of its people and its rich cultural heritage. The convergence of Native, European, African, Caribbean, Asian, and many other cultures to the Delta resulted in a complex and multilayered society.

- The Delta's earliest inhabitants left evidence of 14,000 years of human life that preceded the arrival of Europeans. Mound sites can still be seen throughout the Delta, though the preservation of many are threatened.
- Native American peoples have a vital and distinct Delta story. Native American cultures adapted and survived despite interaction and conflicts with non-native cultures, e.g., exposure to disease to which they had no immunity and the Indian removal policies of the 1830s. Native people had vital governments, economies, social structures, and trade networks long before Europeans arrived in the Delta.
- The legacy of African-Americans in the Delta is rich and varied. Once an enslaved people, their labor built much of the plantation architecture visitors see today. But slavery is only part of the story of African-Americans in the Delta. Art, literature, science, technology, and music reflect the diversity of contri-

butions African-Americans made to the region's and nation's rich cultural heritage.

- The Delta tells a story of the survival of the working poor, labor/work patterns, family life, religion, spiritual expression, and the "spirit of the cultures," such as humor, hospitality, storytelling, and gentility.
- Immigration, whether voluntary or forced, brought peoples of a variety of cultural backgrounds, such as African-Americans and Acadians, to the Delta.

CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS

The Lower Mississippi Delta is known worldwide for its richness of cultural expression. The blues and zydeco were born in the Delta, and gospel, ragtime, rhythm & blues, rock & roll, and country music flourished there. Delta art, architecture, folk art, and food reflect the adaptations of many people to the Delta's physical environment and are an expression of their native or original roots, which gives the region a special sense of place.

- Music is a language that interprets life in the Lower Mississippi Delta in a way that no other mode of expression can. Delta music has had a significant impact on musical forms around the world.
- Delta architecture reflects the region's diverse cultural influences. French and Spanish influences are especially visible in New Orleans, while formal Greek Revival, Queen Anne, and Italianate Revival "Villa" styles and African influences can be found in many areas.
- Plantation architecture, including spatial relationships between the large, classically proportioned plantation houses, slave quarters, and out buildings, is the most visible symbol of the antebellum south when cotton was king.

- The Delta's literature and art reflect a strong sense of place. The land, water, and climate form the background for much of the Delta's art and literature expressions. Kinship, family, tragedy, melodrama, and class differences have long given rise to written expression in the Delta.
- Food is a primary form of cultural expression and is readily apparent throughout the Lower Mississippi Delta.
- The blending of cultures throughout the region is reflected in food, folkart, and literature.

SOCIAL AND POLITICAL INFLUENCES

Social and economic systems, political movements, and government policies have a long history of shaping life in the Delta. Trade patterns, social and political institutions, and warfare of mound-building peoples predate Europeans by many centuries. The struggles caused by European migration and settlement, slavery, Native American removal, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Civil Rights movement are only the most recent reflections of human interaction within the Mississippi River Delta.

- The Delta's earliest inhabitants established trade networks, fought for control of vital resources, and built fortifications to protect themselves.
- European political and social practices disrupted and altered Native American cultures and eventually forced them from their homelands. In addition European diseases decimated tribes across the Delta.
- Slavery, the underground railroad, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Segregation, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Civil Rights movement are key stories of national impact in the Delta. The Delta attracted national attention during the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s. Local

African-American churches were the springboards for civil rights actions. The civil rights movement also turned the region into a political stronghold for the Democratic national party.

- The struggle to close the gaps between racial, ethnic, cultural, and economic differences has a long history in the Delta that continues today. The challenges of the 21st century require developing a greater capacity to pursue development goals within a multi cultural, global economy.

THE DELTA AND THE NATIONAL ECONOMY

The Mississippi River system ties the region together economically. America has long used the river system as a major transportation corridor for shipping goods to international markets, as well as supplying goods to the interior of the country. The river's value to the agricultural and petrochemical economies of the Delta and the nation is preeminent.

- Cotton was the mainstay of the region's economy for more than 150 years. This single crop, with its roots secure in the rich alluvial soil, has had an impact on markets around the world. It was cotton grown in the Delta that supplied the textile markets of England and New England which, in turn, perpetuated the slave labor system of the South. Soybeans, corn and rice cultivation, timbering, oil refining, and the chemical industry helped diversify the region's economy.
- Since 1950 technology has continued to decrease labor requirements for traditional crops — cotton, corn, rice, and soybeans — resulting in a high number of displaced workers.
- The Delta tells the story of the survival of the working poor. There is a dignity in labor in the Delta reflected in the ways people define and sustain them-

selves, which can be observed in neighborhood gardens, in folk art, and crafts.

- Travel and tourism is becoming another major industry in the Delta and the nation. As the number one industry of the late 20th century, travel and tourism can be a vehicle to stimulate the economies of the Lower Mississippi Delta.